

Developments in European services: implications for work, skills and gender equality

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Report on the Policy Conference

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Implications for Work, Skills and Gender Equality***

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- Information about the projects that presented their results at the conference
- List of Participants

Introduction

The policy conference on developments in European services had five objectives:

- to discuss the findings of the latest research into the nature of contemporary work in European services.
- to highlight examples of good practice by the social partners in flexible employment, employee development and equal opportunities.
- to draw out the implications of these developments for national and EU-level policy formulation.
- to identify areas for continuing activities and initiatives to improve the quality of work in European service employment.
- to bring together companies, unions, policy makers, and researchers working in this field, for future collaboration.

These objectives were in keeping with the strategic goals set at the Lisbon summit in March 2000. There were 40 participants who attended the conference, among which were social partners, policy makers from national and EU-level institutions, researchers working on investigations of the dynamics of European service work and employers¹.

Following an introductory session, the conference started with a plenary session on researching service sector employment in which four research projects were introduced: the SERVEMPLOI project, NESY, WHOLE and FLEXCOT². After the first plenary session, there were three breakout sessions in which other European researchers and employment experts from politics, the unions and from businesses held presentations and had discussions. The following topics were addressed in the breakout sessions respectively: 1) Employment - reconciling employers' and employees' different needs for flexibility, 2) Skills training and learning: investing in people in a flexible labour market and 3) Equal opportunities: can equality plans really achieve equality at work? After the breakout sessions, there was a second plenary session in which all of the participants met once again to discuss their impressions.

1. First Plenary Session

¹ See annex for a complete list of participants.

² See annex for more information on the projects.

1.1 Welcome

Andrew Sors, European Commission DG-Research

The first plenary session was opened with a welcome from *Andrew Sors*, European Commission, DG Research. In his welcome, *Andrew Sors* stated that the general aim of the conference was an improvement in the link between research and policy. The subject of the workshop was seen as appropriate for the strategic goal of the European research area, as was formulated at the Lisbon summit, to become the most competitive, dynamic, knowledge based economy combining sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and social cohesion.

In order to realise this goal, a range of policy areas must be addressed. Social policy deals with work organisation, working conditions, health and safety, the working environment, integration of excluded persons, equality between women and men and the informing of and consultation of workers.

The European employment strategy is a political process involving EU institutions, member states and social partners. This process is to be carried out with the open method of co-ordination: common political objectives, agreed indicators and implementation at the member state level in accordance with local traditions and practices. It is an exchange and dissemination of best practice and a learning process which aims to make good practice normal practice.

Foreseen policy challenges for the future are service, skills, gender and age gaps in employment, long-term structural unemployment and regional imbalances. The main issues are the cost of underemployment, poverty and social exclusion and the influence of the ageing population on social protection systems.

How fast new technologies can be implemented is important for the knowledge economy, the management of the information society for sustainable economic growth, and for social and economic disparities. Policy should promote labour productivity exceeding the US, an integrated approach to linking economic, social and political objectives with deadlines and acceleration of structural change. The quick development of new social and economic structures, the capacity for social and civil dialogue, and co-operation and support by the EU will have to be enlarged.

The research presented at this conference is research in the service of European policy and objectives.

1.2 Introduction to the First Plenary Session

Following *Andrew Sors* welcome, *Annette Mikkelsen* introduced the speakers and projects that were to be presented in the first plenary session: *Marie Sylvan*, representative of a Swedish trade union, *Finansförbundet*, opened the series of contributions by drawing the participants' attention to the fundamental changes, that have occurred within the Swedish banking sector over the past decade as an example of developments in the European service sector and their implications for working conditions. Following her presentation, four socio-economic research projects presented their final results with a focus on answering the question of whether a European model of service systems is emerging. These presentations set the framework for the proceeding discussions in three break-out sessions in the course of the conference.

1.3 Why the quality of work in European services matters *Marie Sylvan, Finansförbundet, Sweden*

In this contribution *Marie Sylvan* presented the perspective of the Swedish Financial Services Union on the changes that have taken place in that sector from 1986 to 2001 and pointed out the importance of research for the unions in order for them to work in employees' interests for better working conditions.

Changes in the Swedish bank sector from 1986 to 2001

Over a period of about 15 years, changes in regulations were accompanied by deep changes in the level of employment, in employment relations and working conditions. In 1986 the deregulation of the sector had just been completed. By 1996 Sweden had joined the EU, Norway and Sweden had both had bank crises and there were many redundancies, mergers and acquisitions.

The number of employees in the sector reached its peak in 1990 with 55,000 employees, fell to 42,000 by 1996 and returned to its 1986 level of 47,000 employees by 2001.

Whereas in 1986 agreements were made collectively with the central Swedish bank union, by 1996 there were local as well as central employment agreements, and by 2001 there were individual as well as local and central agreements. Today, employees are much more dependent on their personal capabilities to influence their employment conditions than in the past. And, these capabilities are not equally distributed throughout the workforce.

The financial service business is one of the sectors that is very deeply affected by developments in information and communication technology. This is the case in the Swedish bank sector in particular, because in Sweden there are relatively low barriers against the implementation of new technologies in comparison

to the other European countries. By 1996 there were 14,000 internet customers and data processing had become more centralised through mergers and out-sourcing. In 2001, there were already 3,400,000 internet customers and this is one of the major factors influencing business strategies, the organisation of firms and the demand for qualifications.

Within the firms, the organisational structures have been transformed into less hierarchical and more functional and flexible structures. Between 1986 and 1989 employers began expecting employees to have a broad range of competencies and to be “team players”.

The individual working hours have been changed from fixed hours, 38,5 hours per week from 7:00 to 17:30, and regular week-ends, to more flexible schedules determined by individual agreements.

In 1986, 96% percent of the employees were organised by the trade union, by 1996 it was down to 83% and today only 72% of the employees are organised.

Researchers have found that inequality continues to be a problem in the banking sector. There are indications that there is a gender aspect to mergers. Both the bank and retail sectors are segregated. Women occupy the lower part of company hierarchies. “Women’s work” is not as highly valued as “men’s work”. Furthermore, employees have been hit hard by redundancies and available training is oriented towards short term problems rather than long term employment possibilities.

In order for the Swedish Bank Union to reach their aim of making the best collective agreements possible, they not only consider it necessary to know about the situation in their own country, in the other Nordic countries and in the whole of Europe but also need to be able to forecast possible future developments. The union *Finansförbundet* has done research in the Nordic countries to examine how mergers and other forms of national and international forms of collaboration impact jobs and has worked in co-operation with the SERVEMPLOI project.

1.4 SERVEMPLOI - Innovations in Information Society Sectors – Implications for women’s work, Expertise and Opportunities in European Workplaces

Juliet Webster, Employment Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin

Juliet Webster introduced the SERVEMPLOI project, the research questions and the policy issues that the project addressed. The general aim of the SERVEMPLOI project was to research the implications of innovations in retailing and financial services for women’s work, expertise and opportunities in Europe. The project focused on the implications of technological and organisational change for employees with less resources to deal with

change (i.e. employees in junior positions) and investigated policy implications in general.

There were seven national research teams participating in the project: Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Sweden and the UK. The main research questions were:

- What does the computerisation process look like? How are male and female employees affected?
- What is flexibility? Is it becoming prevalent?
- What about women in junior positions who wish to develop as employees? Can they harness the potential of the knowledge economy?

The field work in each of the seven countries consisted of four case studies and longitudinal studies of six women in each country. A longitudinal study approach was chosen in order to observe changes over a certain period of time.

The findings of the project can be structured into two themes.

- The first theme “getting on and up the ladder” includes the following issues: What skills are important (the “tellers to sellers” phenomena)? How should training and learning be organised? How should it be organised in the European community? How can women progress into good work? What can companies and unions do to help women progress?
- The second theme is “striving for work/life balance” which deals with issues such as: What working patterns do companies have? How are work hours determined? How do employees’ work lives intersect with their home lives?

Some of the findings of the SERVEMPLOI project were discussed in the following presentations by *Heike Jacobsen* and *James Wickham*.

1.5 Convergence or diversity? Is a European model of service systems emerging?

Heike Jacobsen, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund

In this presentation some of the results of the Project SERVEMPLOI were put in relation to the discussion about convergence or divergence of economic and societal developments in the European countries. *Heike Jacobsen* argued that there is some evidence for the assumption that service sectors are embedded in a country’s social system of production. That means that the structure and development of service sectors are shaped by a nationally specific complex of institutions. Important institutions for this are the dominant forms of organisational structures of firms (more hierarchical and centralised as opposed to more horizontal, integrated and decentralised), the dominant preferences of economic actors (more price oriented rather than more quality oriented) and the dominant patterns of labour management, employment relations, relationships between firms, the finan-

cial market as well as the state's influence through legislation and regulation. More research in this field is necessary but the connection between national institutional settings and structural dimensions of services is already evident. For example in Sweden and the UK have a "mass production" approach to services. In the UK this was rooted in poor regulation, in Sweden this was based on firm governmental influence. In Germany a more diversified production system can be seen which offers, for example, insurance firms the chance to compete not only through pricing but also through service and intensified personal customer relationships.

In spite of such differences, comparable developments are to be found in all of the countries studied in the SERVEMPLOI project. Parallel processes of increasing competition can be observed which have already led to "consolidated" markets in some countries and reduced the number of firms, outlets and branches and increased the share of the market held by fewer bigger companies. Internationalisation has increased with the emergence of multinationals in these sectors. There seems to be a common pattern of "modernisation" or "rationalisation" in these service sectors all over Europe and that means bigger companies, fewer outlets, more technically mediated services and less labour intensive customer relationships. In terms of employment, this means that fewer hours of work are needed although business is expanding.

Seen from a distance, it appears that there are increasingly more similarities between countries and centralised decision making by a few big companies in European retail. This is, however, only half of the story. Employees' work experiences, firms' management strategies and customers' experiences are not experienced from a distance. All business is local. Considering convergence does not exclude considering persisting diversity as well. In the future we can expect a new constellation of increasingly international, decreasingly national patterns of service provision and service work. The connection between national and new international institutional factors depends on firms, employees and customers.

1.6 New technologies in European service sectors

James Wickham, Trinity College Dublin

In this presentation SERVEMPLOI's key findings regarding technological strategies and the quality of work in the service sector were outlined. *James Wickham* emphasised the differences in company strategies.

Different responses to competition can be observed in the service sectors. These responses involve the reorganisation of the customer interface through different forms of working with technology, and different forms of information and communication technology. The use of technology ranges from technology

as a tool to full automation. Other forms of working with technology are using it for surveillance, information, organisation and networks. These forms have implications for the forms of service. Face to face service does not require technology but is often technically supported (with the use of scanners for example). Service can also be technically mediated (by the post for example). Machine and automated service require the most technology.

In the retail trade, strategies in response to “price competition in a stagnant market” are changing. In the past, self-service was the key change. Today ICTs enable key changes such as the informationalisation of the supply chain, extended business hours through the use of internet- and teleshopping, and customer profiling. Some of these changes are part of the dominant pattern of the “low skill route”.

In financial service, strategies can be summarised as “new products, new relationships”. Key strategic developments are self-service, new services for more wealthy customer groups, call-centres, further training for customer oriented functions and customer segmenting (possible through information on customers).

The effects of technological strategies on the quality of life is much debated. Positive effects of technological strategies on the quality of life are new employment and skills and a delaying of traditional company hierarchical management structures. Negative effects of technological strategies on the quality of life are stress, job insecurity, intrusion of privacy and poor wages.

Interestingly, technological change is generally welcomed by women who use the technology. Fear of technology is perceived as something that “others” have. Contrary to the image of female employees being afraid of technology, they usually see new technology as something exciting and the lack of investment in technology is seen as a threat.

Three developments have had a particularly big impact on employment:

- Working hours have been extending and have become more variable as a result of deregulation in retail and organisational changes in the financial sector.
- Transparency and surveillance of work have become possible in new ways. More and more often employees (and customers) are “leaving footprints” through the use of technology and these “footprints” are often put on display and used to develop work targets. These targets can in turn be used to threaten those employees not meeting them, although this is not always taken advantage of by employers.
- There is more “using up” of people. More social skills are being required, on the job training is becoming more common as is the use of the employee’s free time.

In conclusion, it was restated that there were different technological strategies in different sectors. *James Wickham* asked the

participants if these strategies were leading to socially unsustainable work and, if in spite of these differences, we were not witnessing the end of national differences in the European service sectors.

In the next section three other research projects and some of their most important findings were introduced. The first project, *NESY*, was an investigation of new forms of employment and working time in the service Economy. The second project, *WHOLE*, investigated the implications of technological and organisational developments for the work related knowledge, and the third project, *FLEXCOT*, analysed the relationship between flexible work practices and communication technology.

1.7 *NESY - New Forms of Employment and Working Time in the Service Economy*

*Steffen Lehdorff, Institut für Arbeit und Technik,
Germany*

The *NESY* project investigated work organisation and employment relationships in five service sectors: Retail, IT, banking, hospitals and at home care for the elderly. The key question was how service work is organised with respect to working hours. Special attention was paid to work organisation and the labour market. *Steffen Lehdorff's* presentation of *NESY's* findings focused on the features of working time distribution and national differences in the computer related service industry, retail trade and at home care for the elderly.

In the computer related service industry, full-time-employment is prevalent. This industry is, however, male dominated. A larger percent of the men than of the women in this industry work more than 40 hours per week. National differences also exist in working time distribution in this industry. Most Germans in this industry work less than 40 hours per week, most of the Dutch work either a little less or a little more than 40 hours per week and the British in this industry often work over 40 hours per week. We can assume that when over-time work is regulated and usually paid for, employers do not seek advantages through extending working hours.

In the retail trade half of the female labour force is employed on a part-time basis, whereas most men work full-time. Again, national differences can be observed. Germany promotes marginal, part-time labour in the retail sector, Denmark promotes youth labour and France promotes full-time labour.

Characteristic of at home care for the elderly is that it is both female dominated and part-time dominated. Employees in this sector actually seem to prefer part-time because the occupation has a low social status.

In conclusion, the retail and social service sectors are undergoing different developments concerning the meaning of part-

time-employment: Whereas skills are decreasing in retail and part-time is increasing against the worker's will, skills in the social service sector are increasing and part-time is increasing at the worker's will.

Steffen Lehndorff questioned the long term social sustainability of the organisation of women's work. Furthermore, he asked how societies can foster and how companies can make use of a skilled female labour force.

1.8 WHOLE - Work Process Knowledge in Technological and Organisational Development

Geert van Hootegem, University of Leuven, Belgium

The *WHOLE* project is a network of 10 institutes working on the concept of work process knowledge (WPK). Between 1998-99 the institutes presented and compiled the results of their field studies. In his presentation *Geert van Hootegem* presented *WHOLE*'s findings on five questions that had been selected for the purpose of this conference:

What is WPK?

WPK is the result of the confrontation of academic knowledge with work experience. It is not secondary knowledge derived from academic knowledge but is independent in character as it emerges from resolving the contradictions between codified knowledge and the activities necessary to actually carry out the tasks. WPK is knowledge related to the work process itself, that is, it is immediately useful for the work to be done. It is constructed within organisations through work itself and linked to understanding the whole work process as opposed to secondary academic knowledge.

Why is WPK a relevant topic?

WPK is a relevant topic because traditional (Tayloristic) work organisation, in which a single standardised task has to be done as quickly as possible, is on the decline. There is a need for workers who have a perspective on the whole production process and their place within it. As the economy becomes more knowledge based, knowledge that is created, shared and used within the organisation becomes an important resource for developing new forms of work organisation. WPK focuses on the much neglected aspect of the demand side of the labour market as opposed to the supply side. Learning is not only about training workers and adapting them to requirements of organisations but also about what is happening inside of organisations and how they organise work, which determines whether workers have opportunities to learn from their work and acquire WPK.

How is WPK linked to the conference themes with regard to flexibility and the flexibility of work?

When workers' learning is only related to the task at hand, they cannot really be flexible in a broad sense. WPK better equips workers to deal with organisational changes. This has the advantage that organisations can then rely on improved internal flexibility rather than having to rely on external flexibility. There are also advantages for the labour market. The qualifications that workers have to offer on the labour market depend, to a large extent, on what they have been able to learn during their previous employment. Therefore, labour market policy should be concerned about the learning opportunities that exist within organisations. WPK is especially important for less qualified workers because they often have fewer learning opportunities. The problem is not the lack of formal training but the types of jobs to which the less qualified are allocated, namely, those that do not allow for learning through the work itself.

How is WPK related to the quality of work?

WPK is related to the quality of work because learning opportunities are essential to the quality of work. Both machines and people add value to service but only people can add value to the work process itself, through acquiring qualifications. Learning opportunities are dependent on the design of jobs. In each organisation a lot of jobs have to be done. The way in which these tasks are divided determines the job composition which determines the quality of work in terms of learning opportunities. To improve the quality of work, the composition of jobs must be changed.

What can be done to improve WPK?

New forms of work organisation can enhance WPK. A strong division of labour that fragments work experience constrains the development of WPK. This applies to the service sector as well as the production sector. In addition to the division of labour within organisations is the division of labour between organisations which has led to developments such as outsourcing which does not promote WPK. Integration of WPK in vocational and educational training (VET) can also enhance the implementation of new forms of work organisation by helping workers to anticipate possible alternatives and explore possible solutions.

1.9 FLEXCOT - Flexible Work Practices and Communication Technology

*Patricia Vendramin, Work and Research Centre
Fondation Travail-Université, Namur, Belgium*

In this presentation *Patricia Vendramin* informed the participants about the *FLEXCOT* project: the main developments in flexible work related to ICTs, the motivations to make organisational changes and the implications of these developments. In her conclusion *Patricia Vendramin* addressed the challenge of a socially sustainable flexibility.

The main objective of the *FLEXCOT* project was to examine the development of flexible work practices associated with the diffusion of new communication technology. Case studies were made in Belgium, France, Italy and the UK by the project partners and in Spain and Denmark by subcontractors. Four sectors were investigated: printing and publishing, banking and insurance, civil engineering and decentralised healthcare.

Main developments in flexible work related to ICTs

The Banking and Insurance sector

Flexible working time, functional flexibility and intensification of work are the main developments to be observed in the banking and insurance sector. Flexible working time includes an extension of hours, an increase in part-time work and evening and weekend work. There are two trends in functional flexibility. The first trend is towards team work and multi-skilling. The second trend is towards the narrowing and flattening of skills and the adaptation to more rapid product and process cycles. The intensification of work with enhanced management planning and monitoring of workers has been made possible by ICTs. General flexibility is introduced through negotiation but negotiation is by-passed through outsourcing in countries with strong regulation.

Civil Engineering

There are two different sub-sectors within civil engineering in regard to ICT and flexibility. In the construction sub-sector the trend is low-tech small enterprises with manual workers utilising largely classical employment practices such as fixed term contracts, overtime pay, shift work and subcontracting. In the design and management sub-sector the trend is towards high-tech qualified workers, skill intensive work, new specialism, standardisation of technical skills, intensification of work and interesting flexible work practices. In design and management, we find examples of win-win situations in flexible work. However, this only applies to professionals.

Publishing

In the publishing sector there is a strong trend towards functional flexibility, locational flexibility and working time flexibility. Functional flexibility is marked by a reduction in demarcation of tasks, skills, flexibility and worker's adaptability. Locational flexibility means that work flow is based on production. This alters the geography of production through decentralisation, outsourcing and network logic. Working time flexibility has been intensified through computerised production which allows later interventions. The implications of this are a longer production day, an intensification of work and unpredictable work times.

Newspapers tend to be produced by extremely small editorial nuclei and a capillary network of journalists and independent

companies that are perfectly integrated thanks to the use of ICTs.

Decentralised Health Care

This sector is less sensitive to ICT. Face to face service is still the core activity as opposed to the management of information. ICT is used as a tool to improve service and make better use of scarce resources which is especially important in this sector because it is a largely public or quasi-public, non-profit sector with few resources.

Motivations to Organisational Changes

Organisational changes are happening in response to an increase in competition and in adaptation to new consumption models. Increasing service accessibility, the sharing of resources and the changing fixed costs into variable costs offer competitive advantages.

Implications of Developments

The main implications of these developments are for the rhythms of production, skills, working conditions and status and gender inequality. "New rhythms of production" means that there has been a move away from standardised working hours in ways that benefit the employer. Production timing is becoming more closely linked to demand. The production day has been extended. Working times have become unpredictable while the work itself has become more intense. Working time, private time and social time have become desynchronised. There are neither negotiated working time reductions nor family-friendly working times.

These developments pose a variety of challenges. They lead to health problems, stress related absenteeism and the exclusion of women and older workers. In order to increase female activity rates and retain older workers new approaches to working time and family-friendly working time models are necessary.

A general broadening of skills in combination with a dual trend can be observed. The first trend is towards multi-skilling, a deepening of skills and specialisation while the second trend is towards a narrowing and flattening of skills and Taylorisation. There is an unequal access to skills development and opportunities. As a result of this, competencies are being wasted. In order to develop a knowledge based economy in Europe it is necessary to invest in human capital (life long learning) and to better organise knowledge.

The persistence of the dualisation of the labour market can be seen in working conditions and status. Although the existing workforce is largely sheltered by current agreements, flexibilisation of contracts is taking place. This usually means negative flexibility for less qualified workers and positive flexibility for highly qualified workers

Gender inequality is being supported by anti-social working times, part-time and non-standard work. But Taylorisation is a bigger consideration than gender inequality.

Conclusion

Patricia Vendramin draws the conclusion that in order to work towards a socially sustainable flexibility, job quality and job quantity must be reconciled. The quality of work cannot continue to be neglected. Intensification of dualisation and exclusion lead to counter performance, are an obstacle to an increase in activity rates and are not compatible with a knowledge economy.

Discussion

Bernadette Fisher, UNIFI, UK, started the discussion by pointing out that the problems in the UK are no different than those of continental Europe in spite of the UK's orientation toward the American model. The American model seems to be dominant all over Europe. A European model of work-life balance has yet to be invented.

She also warned that life long learning can exist independently of WPK. Although there is life long learning at call-centres, there is no real understanding of banking because work goals have been decoupled from the general work process. Workers at call-centres, for example, are, above all else, encouraged to keep the length of their calls to a minimum.

Monique Marti, Union Network International, Switzerland, said that she found the research findings and comments depressing but said that it was necessary for the union to know what the problems were, in order to work towards making working conditions socially sustainable. To her opinion counteraction is possible for the following reasons:

- Management will need to try other solutions to have a win-win situation, which is possible through negotiation.
- Management will be put under pressure by customers.
- There is a growing market for human services, which is possibly due to the increase in computerised work.

Michel Wlodarczyk, Scandia Insurance, Sweden, asked, "Why blame the knowledge economy?" and cited some of the improvements that the knowledge economy has led to, such as less accidents and higher productivity. He is of the opinion it isn't the knowledge economy that is the problem but the deregulation that has occurred since the 1990s as a consequence of globalisation. New regulation is needed for a knowledge society. The old regulation is not sufficient for the knowledge economy because it was designed for an industrial society.

Joachim Ott, European Commission DG Research, supported this opinion by stating that flexibility itself was not the problem but that a new safety net must be constructed. Flexibility is in fact good and should be promoted but it must be balanced out with security and social partners are obligated to improve gender equality as part of the Luxembourg Process.

Jo Morris, Equal Rights Department, Trade Union Council (TUC), UK, addressed radical changes in the social structure. Just one generation ago, women's work revolved around the family. Domestic life has to be readjusted to include more male participation which would be supported by equal pay and pensions as well as equal hours worked. In response to the question as to how we can insure a high degree of choice and control over our work lives while acknowledging the different life phases and different needs of a society of dual earner families, she said that flexibility could actually be beneficial in the context of negotiation because it could improve public access to services and that it was what employees wanted. There are, however, gender differences in why flexibility is wanted. Women seem to want flexibility so they can further their education while men want flexibility to have time for their families and for recreation.

Gillian Shapiro, Shapiro Consulting, UK, said that there was a tendency to neglect the social impact of modernisation and asked how to change the situation when so few organisations are motivated by social considerations. She then added that research was needed to examine the negative social and competitive impacts.

In response to this question, *Etta Olgiati, Fondazione Regionale Pietro Seveso, Italy*, cited some positive examples that she found during her research of good social practices. She found that there is an interest in having women in management and that segregation (contractual, generalised segregation) can be overcome by flexibility but that organisations need to be given reasons to change. Some European guidelines are quite good but it is difficult to get the firms to implement them.

Steffen Lehndorff stated that he saw two basic trends in the knowledge economy. The first is a trend towards a higher participation of women and the second is a trend towards increasing skill requirements. *Steffen Lehndorff* believes that there has been inadequate adaptation to the two basic trends.

Conclusion

During the discussion it became evident that the participants were in agreement that new regulations are needed for reconciling employee's needs with the changing working conditions in the knowledge economy. The lack of a European model of work-life balance was also pointed out as was the need for a life-cycle and long-term research approach.

2. Break out session 1: Employment: From Social Policy to Employment Policy – Lessons for Social Partners

Chair: Juliet Webster, Trinity College Dublin,
Ireland

2.1 Issues for the Social Dialogue

Joachim Ott, European Commission, DG Employment

This presentation contained information about the policy issues and activities in the social partner's dialogue. In the private service sectors there are already 27 active sector dialogue committees. These committees deal with issues in six thematic areas:

- Quality of work
- Employment
- Health and Safety
- Rights at work
- Lifelong Learning
- Employment Policy in Central Eastern European Countries

The Eastern-European enlargement adds new issues to the social dialogue because the employment relations in the MEO-countries are far from the standards set in the EU-15 countries. The question is how the EU-model of industrial relations will function in spite of its diversity.

Joachim Ott also informed the participants about the process of the European Employment Policy. Every year in the late fall, employment guidelines are formulated. The current guidelines highlight the issues of employability, adaptability of firms and employees, and equal opportunities. These topics are then broken down into national action plans by the national governments during the following months. At the end of the process, in summer every year, the national strategies are adopted on the EU-level. Joachim Ott pointed out some current topics of the Social Dialogue: Under the heading of adaptability, flexibility is the major issue of modernisation. Flexibility is regarded as good and useful to employers as well as to employees but it must be held in balance with security. Actual research results show remarkable national differences concerning the penetration of flexibility into employment relations. For example, in Italy two thirds of all new contracts are "flexible" in one or more aspects, while in France, the government is trying to reduce flexible working.

The issue of the gender gap in pay is has recently been defined as a social partners' issue by the commission.

In the discussion following the presentation *Juliet Webster* first asked how the social partners dealt with the tension between employees' and employers' need for determining flexibility in

accordance with their partly conflicting interests. Secondly, she asked how the problem of unequal pay is dealt with in the Social Dialogue.

In answer to this, *Joachim Ott* stated that both topics, flexibility and the gender pay gap, were regarded as minor issues within general wage bargaining. However, gender equality plans have been passed in the postal and commerce sectors. There may be some ongoing debates in other sectors, but the Social Partners see them as national issues.

Jo Morris argued that while the problems of unequal pay cannot be resolved through the Social Dialogue, the European level seems to be the appropriate arena for guidelines for the battle against sexual harassment. This has been regulated quite strongly by the European Commission. In spite of this, the Commission does not seem to be aware of how intense the influence of the unequal pay problem is on other political issues, such as on social policy. If the Commission regarded the gender gap in pay as a serious issue, a European directive would be passed that would force the national governments to incorporate equal pay into their national law.

Ronan O'Brian asked about forthcoming guidelines for the improvement of work quality. His question was answered by *Joachim Ott* who said that in spring 2002 the employment guidelines which were currently being discussed would cover propositions for quality of work in eight policy areas. This will be based on the national action reports which show what has been done so far. *Patricia Vandramin* added that a report of the Dublin Foundation on the quality of work in Europe would be presented in December 2001.

2.2 Flexibility – company activity, worker passivity?

Steffen Lehdorff, IAT, Germany

The second speaker reported on two general trends in service employment: The marketization and the polarisation of qualifications. Marketization means that the principles of the market are increasingly being integrated into the firms' policy. The firms then expect the employees to behave as quasi-entrepreneurs. For example, in health care work, the employees must be aware of the competitors' offers. Polarisation means that both low- and high-qualified jobs are becoming increasingly important on the labour market. As a result of this, divergent trends are observable – some service work is becoming polarised while other service work is increasingly subjected to forms of self organisation.

The political conclusion that is to be drawn from this is that flexibility cannot be available to employers for free. In the case of passive flexibility, where firms require time flexibility and low-skilled work, and in the case of active flexibility with highly qualified and self organised work, "win-win-situations" should be made possible.

Heike Jacobsen questioned this conclusion by asking whether there were any examples of solutions that have met the needs of firms as well as the needs of the employees. What are the indicators for real “win-win-situations” and how are they regulated?

In his answer, *Steffen Lehdorff* pointed out that observations over a longer period of time would be necessary to find the traces of “win-win-situations”, because there was some evidence that organisations’ innovations such as “working time on trust” start with improvements for the employees but tend to increase labour intensity in the long run.

Possible regulations of the labour market as well as the product market were addressed. Concerning the labour market, it would be an appropriate measure to constrain the working hours to a maximal level. The French experience with the 35 hours week shows that such a strategy can be successful. In this case, the shortening of the individual working hours for one part of the labour force opens opportunities for the extending of individual working hours for others.

Another approach is via the product market. Examples from the health care services in the Netherlands and the UK show that there is a tendency towards compulsory competitive standards and accordingly higher qualification levels.

Ronan O’Brien summarised his impression of the presentations and the discussion by stating that the picture was rather depressing. There seems to be an overall tendency to increase the intensity of work, even when “self-organised”. He posed the question as to what influence the actual economic cycle has on the intensity of work.

2.3 Women’s flexible employment – what they have and what they need

*Louise Thomassen, Dansk Technological Institute,
Copenhagen, Denmark*

In this presentation, some findings of the SERVEMPLOI project were interpreted. In the financial services sector the labour force is being deskilled by ICTs when knowledge is incorporated within the informational system. However, there are relevant groups of employees that must acquire more “skills”. Call centres are a new organisational form for handling low skilled numerically flexible work at peak hours. In retail trade numerical flexibility initiated by the employers has mainly been found. In Ireland, an exception because it has an economy with labour shortages, flexibility is sometimes offered to employees as a reward. In the UK, flexible working hours, in particular longer hours per day, are welcomed by mothers with dependent children as a means to reduce the costs of childcare.

In most of the countries researched, the institutional settings favour flexible working time. The cost of flexibility is paid by individuals and families. The cost of being “available” is the employees’ risk, while the benefits are the employers’. *Louise Thomasen* asked whether this was fair. Up until now the trade unions did have not seemed to care about employees with flexible contracts. They have been invisible to the trade unions and lead to the question as to whether the unions are really interested in organising these parts of the labour force or whether they are still hanging onto their role as advocates of the core labour force.

2.4 Corporate good practice: The case of Aachener und Münchener Lebensversicherung

Annas-Rockenfeller, Aachener und Münchener Lebensversicherung, Germany

This contribution was an example of the modern work organisation of a leading German insurance company. In the last years of the 1980s the company invested more than five million Euros in its technical equipment and in qualifying the already highly qualified work staff of about six hundred employees. Each employee was trained over a period of ten months for about forty percent of the individual working hours. This investment was supported by the German Federal Ministry for Research through a programme for research and development for the humanisation of work places. On the basis of the very high qualification level it was possible to organise all work functions into homogenous work groups, making every employee capable of performing every task (with some minor exceptions for special tasks). The company has been able to improve efficiency and productivity enormously and customer service has reached a remarkably higher level of quality. According to *Annas-Rockenfeller*, this is largely due to high employee commitment.

During the 1990s this group work organisation was carefully improved. Since mid 1995 two major changes have taken place: A quality control system was implemented that benchmarks the groups’ output and measures quality as well as productivity and the groups have begun to organise themselves on an even more autonomous basis. This kind of work organisation seems to function very well. Productivity has increased by about 20 percent and employee surveys show that the personnel is very content with their highly qualified work.

In the following contribution, *Ms. Merlin*, Ministry for Labour and social Affairs, France, talked about the French experience with the law on the 35 hour working week. She explained that before the past elections, under the former conservative government in France, as in other European countries, labour was mainly flexibilised by reducing the individual hours of part-time employees on the one side and extending the individual hours of many full-time employees on the other side. The goal of the liberal government was to reduce the individual working time of full-time

employees to about 35 hours per week on average annually. A law was put into effect in January 2000 for firms with more than 20 employees. By February 2002 this law will also apply to small Firms with less than 20 employees. In preparation for the implementation of the law, negotiations have been taking place over a period of about two years (1998-2000). In 2001, 7 Mio people out of a total labour force of 15 Mio, worked within the 35-hours-framework, and 300 thousand new jobs were created. The social partners found solutions for the realisation of the 35-hour work week by creating new jobs. Those firms that have reduced the individual working hours very fast have created the highest number of new jobs.

Today, two thirds of the employees are content or very content with their working hours. The most positive affects have occurred within the work lives of highly qualified female employees with children.

3. Break out session 2: Skills, training and learning: investing in people in a flexible labour market

Chair: James Wickham, Trinity College, Dublin

In this session the question of learning and skills acquisition was the central point of interest. In the discussion on the necessity of skills, competencies and qualifications on the EU level as well as in the different European countries, immense efforts are undertaken to match the needs of organisations for qualified labour with the interests of individuals in developing their personal qualifications. In this session there was an attempt to investigate this issue on the basis of research findings from two projects (SERVEMPLOI and WHOLE) and with examples from the financial sector in the UK and in Sweden.

3.1 *Developing skills, creating value – results of research (SERVEMPLOI),* *Esther Fernandez Mostaza, University of Barcelona*

Esther Fernandez Mostaza gave a report on the findings of SERVEMPLOI about the development of skill demands and qualification processes within the financial services and the retail trade in seven European countries and its implications for women's employment conditions and labour market positions. Globalisation and informatisation were identified as the main challenges for firms. In the financial services sector in particular these factors have become increasingly influential because they affect not only the processes of production but also the products themselves. New products have been created that are based on the use of ICTs, and transnational business activities have become a daily experience for the consumers as well as for the employees. How was this reflected by the firms' training policies and recruiting strategies? The SERVEMPLOI case studies show that there are remarkably parallel developments:

- Many elder employees have been laid off by measures of early retirement. At present only very few people in the financial services sector are aged over 55 and only very few people have an occupational experience of more than 30 years.
- Applicants with a university degree or similar certificates of formal general education have been recruited from the external labour market. Those women who are able to meet these requirements have a good chance of being hired.
- Internal training has been expanded to a remarkable degree, however, there are some exceptions from this.

By using these measures, financial services firms are trying to underlay their business with a high overall average degree of qualification. The formal level of qualification and the intensity of training has increased. A more qualitative change was obser-

ved in so far as the qualifications demanded shifted from focusing on “administrative” work to selling work. Selling financial products has become the major commitment of employees in the financial services. At this point, female gendered skills have become a matter of interest in so far as being socially competent and , for example, being able to get along with difficult customers seems to have become more crucial for the firms. Therefore, female employees are regarded as an essential group within the labour force and that is, seen from a historians point of view, a fundamental change in this sector. On the other hand , this is not without uncertainties, because these gendered qualifications also tend to be labelled as less valuable than those required for dealing with great amounts of money and with entrepreneurial customers in particular. This suggests that there is an ongoing segregation between female and male employees along the differentiation between more or less wealthy private customers in some cases and between private banking and investment banking in general.

Unlike in financial services, in the retail trade qualification demands have not been increased in general. Retail firms make more use of flexible labour and try to reduce costs by deskilling the labour force. Nevertheless the incorporation of the ICTs in the business process requires more basic knowledge of arithmetic and accounting also on the bottom of the hierarchy; in particular skills in handling computer related tools and a basic understanding of the processes behind the screens is necessary. In this respect, there are deficits to be observed which could be removed by a personnel policy that puts more emphasis on the quality of working conditions. It is not at least the overall negative or unattractive appearance of work in the retail trade that gives way to a decrease in the overall level of qualifications in this sector.

3.2 New knowledge requirements arising from the introduction of ICT into services (WHOLE), Nick Boreham, University of Stirling, UK

The WHOLE project carried out case studies of the knowledge requirements in service organisations which had introduced ICT and more flexible ways of working in order to improve competitiveness. The case studies covered “material” services like telecommunications sales, hotel industry, air traffic control, “human” services (automobile repairs, fire service, health service, and education), and information services (industrial design, financial services and industrial laboratory work). The basic hypothesis was that where ICT had been used to bring disparate units together to form a network and to share information laterally throughout the organisation, employees at all levels needed a broad knowledge of the overall work process, Work Process Knowledge (WPK). Giving employees this level of knowledge about the work

in the organisation in which they are employed was a radical development.

Nick Boreham outlined the findings of two of the case studies to show what this development looked like and what problems could occur if not enough attention were given to WPK. Within a telecommunications sales organisation inefficiencies were caused by a lack of WPK because many new interfaces had been created within the organisation that had to be overcome in order to reply to the customers. For example the division of the sales work between a customer service representative in a call centre and experts who should have provided the representatives with knowledge needed to answer detailed enquiries made it necessary for each to have an understanding of the perspective of the other.

In his second case study *Nick Boreham* gave very instructive information on what could be understood as the cultural content of WPK: A debt collecting agency introduced a computerised system that changed the work process. As a result of the new system, debtors are now called automatically and employees are continuously employed in talking to debtors. Furthermore, employees are forced to report their experiences to the system and make it transparent to their colleagues. The accumulation of narratives within the system, and who the employees interact with, constitute both the work process itself and knowledge of the work process. For a newcomer to acquire knowledge of the work process, he or she must become part of the culture. New employees are provided with the knowledge and skills they need, partly during a training period, but mainly by joining the workforce and becoming part of the interactive system of employees, debtors and narratives.

The development of WPK is less a matter of formal vocational education and more a part of the overall organisational development. Nonetheless it is not inevitable, modernisation can also be exerted by reducing skills and intensifying work without explicitly acquiring WPK. If WPK is seen as useful it can be best acquired by a combination of vocational school training and learning based on work experience.

3.3 Skills and training – the route to business development,

Michel Wlodarczyk, Skandia Insurance, Sweden

Michel Wlodarczyk described developments in training in Skandia Insurance. He argued that firms such as Skandia are increasingly needing to place competence development at the core of their business model. We need therefore to consider ‘training’ in terms of Strategic Competence Development. Training can no longer be a separate division of the company. Intriguingly, he claimed that companies also need in some sense to ‘train’ customers and other stakeholders also.

In order to acquire competences firms will have to have to have access to a range of suppliers, ranging from 'corporate universities' to conventional universities. At the same time individuals need to take responsibility for their own training, and this requires that the company recognise there are both individual and organisational needs. One mechanism for increasing the level of training which is used by Skanidia is the individual *Competence Savings Account*. Here the company makes available to individual employees a specified level of funds which can be spent on whatever training the employee considers appropriate. Training can be accessed through the company's 'Competence Marketplace' on its intranet.

In discussion *Michel Wlodarczyk* suggested that where private provision of competences is important, firms are increasingly attempting to co-operate in defining agreed standards. He also suggested that the term 'tellers to sellers' in financial services was inappropriate, since, as he remarked, 'Nobody sells any more'. Customers are more sophisticated, and require *advice* from 'sales' staff – which raises again the importance of competence development for these employees.

3.4 Employee development – a union initiative to provide bank workers with learning opportunities, Bernadette Fisher, UNIFI, UK

Bernadette Fisher reported on the discussion about lifelong learning in the UK and gave an example for a trade union initiative to promote skill development in call centres in the north east region of England. The British government had entered the election campaign with the slogan "Education, Education, Education!" after having recognised that the most urgent problem of the British labour market is that people are not qualified according to the labour market's demand. In an attempts to make more education for adult people successful, several barriers need to be overcome. The British trade unions can play an important role in this process. Access to life long learning measures is partly regulated by the TUC who is also responsible for funding. *Bernadette Fisher* painted a picture of the working conditions of employees in North East British call centres that illustrated the most crucial factors for implementing successful qualification measurements under such conditions. It was the explicit goal of these qualification measurements to enable people to develop themselves as competent persons. Therefore, beside some work related issues, several fields of competence were addressed without direct relationship to the actual work places of the participants. The training was supported by TUC and accessible only to TUC members. According to *Bernadette Fisher*, this enhanced the employees' capabilities to make their own choices regarding their future careers.

4. Break out session 3: Equal opportunities: Can equality plans really achieve equality at work?

Chair: Annette Mikkelsen, UNI-Europe,
Belgium

In this break out session there were four reports that addressed the problem of achieving equality at work. *Elisabeth Sundin* and *Gunilla Rapp* started the breakout session with an introduction to the term “equal opportunity” and reported on national and sector differences in inequality. *Etta Oligiati* and *Gillian Shapiro* then reported on what equality plans have achieved in European organisations, after which, *Marisa Pecere* gave a detailed account of a retail company striving for equal opportunity. Finally *Silke Laskowski* spoke about the need for equal opportunity legislation.

4.1 How unequal are Europe’s service organisations?

*Elisabeth Sundin and Gunilla Rapp, National Institute
for Working Life, Sweden*

Elisabeth Sundin and *Gunilla Rapp* problematised the common understanding of what “equal opportunities” mean. It is not as simple as it seems to be to define what “equality” is. Do opportunities or outcomes define what is equal?

Societal Level

Although organisations and individuals have been the focus of the research discussed here, it is important to remember that they are acting within a wider societal context. In spite of the fact that equal opportunity has been on the EU-agenda from the very beginning of the union, there are differences of great importance among the member countries. Policy areas that vary fundamentally concern the care of the elderly and children. Is there a public child care system? How long are maternity leaves and what are the conditions? Is there also paternal leave? There are different welfare systems, different traditions and power systems. Each country has a sex/gender system which can be understood as one power system among others.

Sector Level

Other differences of importance are the differences in how regulation is handled - What are the opening hours? How common is part-time? What structures exist? Are there many small family-owned firms or a few large national or international ones? Are the banking and insurance sectors separate? How powerful are the unions?

There are great differences between sectors and between different firms/organisations and between the different work sites of the same organisation.

What we see on a societal level is the result of what is constructed within organisations. Inequality of wages and salaries as well as gender and other power systems are the result of decisions of organisations which constitute societies. On the organisational level, the gender system should be understood as gender order. Gender order is one of the fundamental characteristics of organisational culture which makes it difficult to change as propositions for change tend to preserve organisational culture. Gender order can be described as the

- sex/gender division of labour
- symbolism of gender
- relations between men and women

In short, there are vertical and horizontal dimensions of the gender order and its components differ in scope (what is included?) and strength (at what price can the order be challenged?).

Retail sector

The retail sector is a big employer for women in all of the *SER-VEMPLOI* countries and gender segregation exists in this sector in every country. Often the gender label is determined by the products. It is appreciated or even demanded by the customers.

There are small differences here from one country to the next. There are big differences, however, from one country to the next as well as within countries (depending on organisational strategies), concerning opening hours and part-time employment.

The retail sector has a relatively flat hierarchy. Men are leaving the sector which is giving women new opportunities. There are many women in first-line management but many women are doing managerial work without being paid for it. As a rule women in this sector are not eager to have careers because they have to pay too high a price for it, i.e. having a career pushes their personal needs (which already come after their children's and husband's needs) even further down their list of priorities. The gender division of labour in the private sphere makes it harder for women to have careers as managers.

Financial service sector:

As a rule, the financial sector used to be segregated along the line of front-desk work and back-desk work but it is becoming increasingly by segregated along product lines, i.e. private versus professional customers, firms and companies. The consequences of new technology have a gender dimension. Call centres are the most obvious example of this. There are quantitative as well as qualitative consequences, whereas women of all ages and young men in the periphery are mainly affected quantitatively both men and women with rather high education in the centre of the organisations are affected qualitatively:

Technology is being used for the first time to monitor and control highly educated employees. A high education used to offer protection from individual and instant surveillance.

Stability and Change: What is the main pattern?

Change is taking place within an existing structure, not just within firms and companies but also within a gender system on the societal level and within a gender order on the organisational level. Nevertheless, these structures are not deterministic. The strategies of the organisations are the most important. Some retail firms, for example, choose a high quality strategy while others choose a low price/low quality strategy. Strategies determine which skills are needed and valued and which skills are highly gendered. Equality policy, real gender neutral practice and individual strategies are all relevant within the societal and organisational context.

Great differences on the sector level are to be observed in the financial sector between Germany and the UK, for example, and between Spain, Italy and Sweden in the retail sector. In every single country many women in the retail sector would not be employed in the financial sector.

In both the retail and the financial sectors and on every level we can see signs of increasing equality between men and women. At the same time, however, we can also see new gender-lines popping up like call centres, odd-hours in retailing, and increasing differences between the sectors, between organisations and within organisations. There is more equality (less inequality) between male and female colleagues but growing hierarchical inequality which has an impact on men and women. A polarisation of society, of the sectors and of the companies can be observed which means both increasing equality as well as increasing inequality.

4.2 What can equality plans achieve? The results of a survey of European organisations

*Etta Olgianti, Fondazione Regionale, Pietro Seveso, Italy
Gillian Shapiro, Shapiro Consulting, Research and Training, UK*

In order to answer the question of what equality plans can achieve, *Etta Olgianti* and *Gillian Shapiro* presented the results of their research project carried out at the European Foundation for Improvement in Living and Working Conditions in the last year on gender equality in the workplace.³ The project was an analysis of 21 company cases in seven EU countries: Germany, Finland, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK. Following a brief description of the characteristics of the case study is a summary of the research findings and finally, the dynamic tracking equality model that was developed on the basis of these findings.

³ Olgianti, Etta and Shapiro, Gillian (2002): Promoting Gender Equality in the Workplace, downloadable from: www.eurofound.ie/publications

Case Study Characteristics

The case studies covered seven sectors: financial services (5 case studies), distribution (1), retail (2), manufacturing (5), public service (3), transport (1) and IT (4). Three of the case studies were medium sized and eighteen were large companies. Ten were male dominated, seven balanced and four female dominated.

Eighteen of the companies were unionised. Fifteen of the companies were multinational, seven of which had head offices in the case country.

The research design had four dimensions:

- The outcomes of equality actions
- The factors that motivate and influence equality action
- The content of equality action
- The process for implementing equality actions

Outcomes of equality actions

The project investigated not only the outcomes of equality actions for women but also the outcomes for the whole organisation. Outcomes for women were that there were more women at professional and managerial levels, more women in non-traditional areas, improved flexible working opportunities and work-life balance and that women became more proactive in taking responsibility for their own careers. Outcomes for the whole organisation were cultural and behavioural changes in understanding the value of equality, changing perceptions of women's skills, worth and role, improved employee retention, attendance and satisfaction, improved maternity return rates and improved public image

The factors that motivate and influence equality action

Factors that were found to motivate equality action were national Legislation, national equality programmes, collective bargaining, changes in the competitive and labour markets, supportive organisational culture and values, innovative human resource management and a partnership approach to industrial relations on the company level

The content of equality action

The equality action covered equality in recruitment and selection, professional development of women, work organisation and the organisation's equality environment, and the reconciliation of work and family life.

The process for implementing equality actions

Key ingredients in the process of implementing gender equality were: an initial analysis of problem areas, goal setting and planning, integrating equality with other Human Resource Management strategies and policies, engaging and mobilising different actors (trade union representatives, managers, middle and senior women and male employees), ensuring sufficient investment of financial and human resources to achieve the goals set, moni-

toring results and communicating the need for action and results achieved internally.

The Dynamic Tracking Equality Model

On the basis of the research findings a dynamic tracing equality model was developed to help equality practitioners and researchers to identify the reasons why an organisation is at a particular stage in its development of equality, what different options are available, what challenges are present in developing equality further and sustaining it over time and the reasons why equality development may be blocked.

	Content	Process	Outcomes
Stage 1	focused	one shot	limited
Stage 2	scattered	building blocks	leopard spots
Stage 3	transversal	continuous	across the board

Tracking the development of equality

As stated above, the Dynamic Tracking Equality Model can be helpful in finding the reasons why an organisation is at a particular stage in its development of equality. If, for example, a company were in stage 2 of equality development, that is to say, the content of a company's equality plan was scattered (covered several but not all dimensions of inequality) and the process consisted of building blocks (specific goals that were intended to build on to each other) then the company could expect leopard spot outcomes (improvements in equality in some areas).

The model can also be used to identify what different options are available and what challenges are present in developing equality further and sustaining it over time. A company in stage 2 of equality development can work towards achieving sustainable equality and outcomes across the board by extending the content of their equality plan (making it transversal) and/or by making the equality development process continuous.

The model is also helpful in identifying the reasons why equality development may be blocked. If a company with a scattered equality plan content only has a one shot equality development process, they are going to encounter problems and can only expect limited outcomes.

4.3 Striving for equal opportunities - the view from a retail company

Marisa Pecere, Coop Adriatica, Italy

In this report Marisa Pecere brought the experiences of a particular retail company into the discussion on the contribution of women to European work. While she acknowledged that there is still much to do at the work place and in society to remove the obstacles that continue to prevent women from expressing and being valued for their competencies and skills, Pecere gave an example of good practice in social policy management.

Co-op Adriatica – company background

The Co-op is a system of consumer co-operatives. It is the largest Italian distribution chain that mainly runs supermarkets and hyper-markets.

In 2000 there were:

Sales Outlets	Sales (in million Euro)	Employees	Partners
1,279	8,643.5	41,4000	over 4,500,000

At the heart of the Co-op's policy is the creation and management of distribution companies that pursue objectives of a social nature and in the collective interest, such as safeguarding health and the environment, consumer information and education, a commitment towards the younger generation, the modernisation and development of the Italian distribution system. The Co-op received the "Corporate Conscience Award 2001" as the company which is the world-wide most committed to realising working conditions and environments that respect people's and worker's rights.

Almost 70% of the employees are women, 30% of the female staff work part-time and the number of women working part-time through personal choice is growing. The gender percentages are reversed at the higher ranks which contain greater levels of responsibility. Women are nonetheless represented in all fields of work. From the top management, to the running of hyper-markets and supermarkets, to the administration, down to absolutely dominating in sales positions.

Personnel Policy

The new employment over the last five years is female in 80% of the cases. 30% of the new staff are over 32 years old. This is worth stressing because it is the direct result of a well-defined policy of a high degree of social responsiveness. For example, in Bologna, the Co-op has set up a course called "retravailler" for female workers who have been made redundant (some of the partici-

pants were up to 50 years old) and has successfully helped these women to fit into a new hyper-market.

The corporate labour contract provides for an unpaid six-month leave, a bonus in the working life of all employees, taking into account that they are mainly women. It also considers the possibility of transforming greater labour flexibility into paid leave.

For example, in the face of extended opening hours to 10 p.m., they have, in co-operation with the trade union, introduced an interesting innovation: after twelve shifts finishing at 10 p.m. the worker can choose between a paid bonus or a paid leave.

The company also tops up the maternity benefits to 100% of the regular salary during the mandatory maternity leave (the state covers 80%) and provides the chance to have paid leave until the child's second birthday (one year longer than what is required by law). Working mothers also receive unpaid leave until the child's eighth birthday.

The obstacles to equal opportunities and equality policy at Co-op Adriatica

Although the co-operative culture (which is born of a deep-seated solidarity) is always mindful of women's lives, the form of the organisation of work and career pathways (with numerous examples of mothers who have seen their role and responsibilities grow after maternity), flexibility, the extension of opening hours and competition push them towards working time that is less favourable to women, when one considers that social services (day cares and schools) lack flexibility. The social context is increasingly less tailored to the needs of people: women, children and men. Conciliating work with personal life remains difficult for women. The obstacles to equal opportunities are present both in the society and in the businesses that are part of it.

Even co-operative companies must play a driving role in making female work more practicable, more recognised and satisfying. The organisational efforts of the Co-op head in the direction of the reclaiming of time. A project called "Isole" (islands) is going to be launched soon which will allow the checkout divisions and the divisions with sales assistance to self-organise working times. A project for reorganising the hyper-markets into teams of managers that makes the work of individuals less onerous, even in terms of times, has also just been launched.

Conclusion

Employees demand company subsidised day care which coincides with the increasingly flexible working shifts. The actions to be undertaken to improve equal opportunities, even if small, must be of a continuing kind with a regular commitment on the part of the Co-op, as a sector that is mostly made up of women. Essential elements are the observation of work, the benchmarking of ideas and opportunities for exchanging views such as in this conference.

4.4 Enforcing equal opportunities through legislation - why and when is this necessary?

Silke Laskowski, Universität Hamburg, Germany

In this presentation *Silke Laskowski* brought her experience at the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth into the discussion on why and when equal opportunity legislation is necessary.

At present there is not an Equality Act for women and men in the private sector in Germany. Contrary to this, there are several Equality Acts (“Frauenfördergesetze”) for the public sector (federal and state departments, universities and public services). By order of the German Family Affairs Minister, *Christine Bergmann*, a team of legal experts (female judges and professors and *Laskowski* herself) prepared a draft for an “Act on Equality between Women and Men” which aimed to improve gender equality (equality of opportunities) and family-friendliness in German companies.

This did not proceed because of the resistance of the leading German industrial associations to such an act. Arguments against the act were the expectations that it would create more bureaucracy, generate unnecessary costs, and jeopardise Germany’s economic base.

In July 2001, the German government and four leading German industrial associations signed an agreement, in lieu of an Equality Act, which was referred to in the media as the “breakthrough agreement on affirmative action for women in the private sector”. However, not everybody shared that official view. After the public announcement of the agreement, women’s associations, the German Trade Federation, several parties, academics, and representatives of the church clearly rejected the agreement. In their opinion it was just an ineffective declaration of intention but no equivalent substitute for an Equality Act.

Women in the private sector in Germany

Statistical data shows that women continue to be disadvantaged in Germany in several ways: Although women’s qualifications have risen, they do not have equal positions to men (only 5% of the top management jobs are held by women). Women often begin with jobs below their qualifications. There is no compatibility between work and family / bringing up children is the women’s responsibility. And there are gender related pay differentials (women earn 75% of what men do).

Agreement / self-regulation versus law

The question as the “right” instrument to implement gender-equality depends on the importance of the issue and on the effectiveness of the instrument. If an issue is only of minor general interest it may be justifiable to allow the problem to be solved through self regulation but if the problem concerns a large number of people (and all of the people employed in the private sec-

tor is a very large number of people) it is of great social interest and requires an impartial and fair solution for all persons affected. In such a case, only the state is (or at least should be) independent from particular interests and therefore able to offer a fair and adequate and appropriate solution.

Contrary to the opinion of the leading industrial associations, law does not always mean more bureaucracy. Modern law tries to combine state responsibility for appropriate solutions with private commitment. The expert's Equality Act is an example of such modern legislature: "regulated self-regulation". The expert's bill has a two step structure and is based on labour law:

- Step 1: analysis of the company's structure of staff and payment
 individual equality management
 social partners
 period of two years for reporting
- Step 2: restrictions by law
 sanctions
 legal action instituted by associations that work for gender equality

Conclusion

The agreement between the German government and the leading industrial associations is no alternative to an Equality Act. It will not be effective because it includes no concrete measures that have to be implemented by the companies; the agreement has no binding character, and there are no sanctions in the case that one party breaks their agreement.

Germany still needs an effective Equality Act for the private sector. The expert's Equality Act could be a paradigm.

Discussion

Can equality plans really achieve equality at work? The discussion following these presentations addressed some of the obstacles to achieving equality at work through equality policy. The main topics were the importance of studying gender constructions, the lack of monitoring of the effects of company policies and equality legislation.

It is important to study not only the effects of gendering but also how it functions. We need to understand what kinds of practices are gendering practices because gendering is an "anchoring" practice for other practices. Unfortunately, studies on the profitability of equality are weak. They typically do little evaluation.

Gender easily "falls off" the agenda. It isn't serious or central to the agenda. Once the process is stopped, progress erodes. Why don't companies consider it necessary to measure the effects of their policies? Companies are motivated by legislation rather than real change. They have a "check-box" mentality. The unions support this because they do not seem to be interested in what happens beyond the policy level either. Often monitoring simply

happens too early or people are afraid to see the results. Evaluations are done by consultants. The discussion doesn't go beyond the economic implications of policy.

On the other hand, there are economic advantages to having an image of being a company with progressive social policies which can be an effective incentive for a company to maintain and improve its social policies.

Not all European countries have Equality Acts and equality is valued differently from one country to the next. Equality has very little value in Germany for example and does little to improve a company's image. Diversity policy does not effectively deal with equality because equality is not only about ethnicity. Equality is more about women and families.

The conclusion was drawn, that it is important to study gendering phenomena and the economic as well as non-economic impacts of equality. An improvement in social policy requires equality legislation because without legislation, equality doesn't seem to be taken seriously. Equality is valued differently in different EU countries. In order for real change to take place equality plans have to go beyond the policy level to include monitoring and evaluations of the outcomes of the policy.

5. Final Plenary Session: **Policy Paradoxes: raising performance and improving the quality of work in European services – irreconcilable agendas?**

Chair: Monique Marti, Union Network International, Switzerland,
Juliet Webster and James Wickham, Trinity College, Dublin

The final plenary session was opened by *Monique Marti*, representative of Union Network International, by stating that it is very useful to have results of research and actual figures about employment and work conditions in the service sector. Half of the membership of UNI, the trade union for employees in service occupations, is female. Therefore, a special interest in the gender implications of current developments in the service sector is very useful.

Juliet Webster made the first contribution to this session. She talked about the policy issues addressed by the SERVEMPLOI project. She focussed on three sets of issues: The reconciliation of employers' and employees' needs, the role of knowledge and/or competency, and the prospects for more gender equality.

Reconciling needs of employers and employees:

Employers in service industries tend to need more flexible labour and more labour at non-standard ("anti-social") working hours. In general, there is an increasing extension of operating and working hours. Employees in service industries can accommodate more working time flexibility but only if they have control over it and it is predictable. If the economy is becoming more "consumer driven" this implies, as can be seen in the UK, the advancement of a "long hours culture". But working longer hours per day tends to exclude women with domestic responsibilities from promotions because they find it difficult to manage the long working hours which usually feature in more senior jobs. Therefore, women have to pay for their choices. This puts the question to the employers: How do they want to make sure that long and flexible working hours are socially sustainable?

This question opened the discussion for the audience. The first comment came from *Jo Morris*, TUC, UK, who addressed the issue of equality in payment: The problem of "Equal Pay" is integrated into a complex of social sustainable work conditions. In contrast to working hours there is relatively strong legislation on equal pay on the European level. The gender gap in pay is the responsibility of the social partners and they are asked to exert their influence on the national actors.

Knowledge or competency?

The development of a "knowledge society" was one of the premises of the SERVEMPLOI-project. The findings lead to the questi-

on, "why aren't more companies actually fostering employee knowledge?" For example, a case study of a British bank revealed that employees get their information about new products from the same leaflets that are disseminated to the customers. Another example of the restriction of knowledge acquisition is the case of a retail firm where sick leave is "punished" by restricting the employee's access to training. Some companies assume that training in jobs with high labour turnover is uneconomical. In general it must be asked: Are we satisfied with "competencies" alone or do we want real knowledge?

In reply to this question *Hanne Shapiro* added for some input from Break-out Session 2: Competency and qualification have different meanings in different European countries. The differences are underlined by contrasting realities; in the Break-out Session three cases with different levels of skill were presented. The conclusion drawn was that technology can empower people to take more control of their own settings. Being competent in working with ICTs enables employees to acquire higher qualifications.

Are we willing to pay for equality?

Service work often involves the use of social and interpersonal skills which are learnt by women through their socialisation – or what has been termed an "apprenticeship into womanhood". Are these skills therefore taken for granted by employers? Many companies seem to be aware of the fact, that they "under promote" their female workforces. They know that they have a bottle-neck problem: Women are concentrated at the bottom of company hierarchies because their competencies are assessed as suitable for the tasks carried out at this level, and they are not promoted on the basis of these competencies. It seems as though these women are hardly touched by existing equality plans. These plans only seem to be applied to senior female staff. And several organisations are really committed to their equality plans for this part of their personnel. But promoting women to higher levels within the hierarchy seems to be mainly done in periods of economic growth. In a period of little growth or even stagnation, as Europe is currently facing, equality plans lose their attraction and the issue of gender equality as a whole seems to come loose at the roots: treating women equally really means promoting them in periods of labour shortages as well and of course, abolishing the gender pay gap.

This proposition was complemented by the report on Break-out Session 3 by *Elizabeth de Renzy*. In this session it was discussed that an important reason for the deep rootedness of gender inequality in the labour market is that gendering, in the sense of treating men and women as unequal, serves as an "anchoring practice" (*Gherardi*) for the actors. Making use of gender as a practice of social differentiation reduces complexity and simplifies decision making. But it was also reported that gender equality can be used as a factor for enhancing productivity and employee satisfaction. This leads to the conclusion that the time has come to overcome gendering as an anchoring practice.

In a short interchange of statements after *Juliet Webster's* contribution, *Monique Marti* expressed her satisfaction with these concluding propositions. They were seen by her as a break-through in looking at the problems of gender inequality. *Bernadette Fisher* expressed the wish to get copies of all of the papers and slides from the conference and was supported by several other participants.

In a final statement, *Ronan O'Brien* put the conference proceedings into the context of current European policy issues. The Economic Summit and the Lisbon Conference, with their quite optimistic estimations for the possibility of an easy reconciliation of employers' and employees' needs and "win-win" scenarios for the future work place, took place at the height of economic prosperity during the nineties. The "dot-com bubble" in the economic background may have influenced these assessments. The issue of social sustainability in the work life was addressed as a priority on the EU-level by the Green Paper on Work Quality in 1997. That was an important milestone in the attempt to shape a policy for better work conditions on the EU-level. Two studies by the European Foundation for the improvement of living and working conditions, the EPOC-study⁴ and the survey on working conditions⁵ came to rather pessimistic outlooks.

The contradictions between these diverse perspectives should not be allowed to confuse the observer in politics and research. However, they should lead to the conclusion that all the issues addressed must not be put in one basket: Economic growth, employment, equality and the quality of work conditions are subjects of different policy areas. Contradictions exist between these areas, and there is no way a "command-control-situation". Instead, it seems that it is going to be quite a long battle to bring these things together.

With the results presented by the projects in this conference in mind, *Ronan O'Brian* led the discussion to some fundamental new questions:

- Do we really already understand the relationship between the quality of work and the companies' needs? If there are trade-offs, how can they be qualified and quantified and what are the policy issues?
- What do we mean by "performance" and "productivity"? If the modern work life pushes parts of the costs for higher productivity on to the individual employees, to their partners and children or to the social security systems, the economic indicators only tell half of the story.
- There is a lot of progress in research and a remarkable amount of results can be seen as a result of EU-policy. The issue of

⁴ Employee Direct Participation in Organisational Change: EPOC, see: Session, Keith (200): Direct Participation and the Modernisation of Work Organisation, downloadable from: www.eurofound.ie/publications

⁵ Paoli, Pascal; Merllie, Damien (2001): Third European Survey on Working Conditions 2000, downloadable from: www.eurofound.ie/publications

gender inequality is still under researched which is significant because equality policy is central to EU-policy as a whole. Research on ethnic minorities in the labour market is clearly lacking.

Finally, *Ronan O' Brian* expressed his satisfaction with the proceedings of the conference and the underlying research by stating that "We of the Commission are extremely pleased by this work".

